

The Covenant are Coming

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Category: Halo

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2014-05-01 22:57:55

Updated: 2014-05-27 09:35:10

Packaged: 2016-04-27 04:59:31

Rating: T

Chapters: 2

Words: 9,900

Publisher: [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

Summary: Originally posted as 'An Eventful Wedding,' I've decided to expand the story some to include more characters and a bit more story arch. Feedback of all kinds is welcomed.

## 1. An Eventful Wedding

Stuart fidgeted in his seat. At most weddings, they had pews in a chapel. At this one, they were on metal folding chairs outside. It wasn't very pleasant, and the presence of his handgun in the small of his back didn't make it any more comfortable.

Louise, his wife, noticed his fidgeting and, unfortunately, knew why he was fidgeting. "I don't know why you had to bring that thing," she whispered. "Now I have to be paranoid that people are going to know that I came with the crazy one."

Stuart shrugged. "I didn't even want to come." There was, of course, no point in telling her what he'd read. That, in certain forums she was certain to find 'questionable,' there'd been mention of sightings. Of attacks.

He didn't have to see her to know she was glaring at him. He could hear it. "They came to our wedding."

The conversation could have continued. But, they each knew the script. Stuart would point out that they had been friends with Emma and Steve six years ago, when he and Louise married. Since then, they'd drifted apart and now they were nothing more than acquaintances, invited only so that Emma and Steve could spend the rest of their lives saying they had "over a hundred and fifty" people at the wedding. And maybe because they knew Louise would pay more for their gift than they paid for Stuart and Louise's catering.

Louise, had the conversation progressed, would have made arguments that seemed perfectly rational to anyone other than Stuart: she for one was happy for Emma, and wanted to see her in her dress, as well as to congratulate her. Giving up a Saturday - strapped to a handgun

or not - and buying a kitchen appliance seemed a small price to pay.

Stuart was cognizant of the dress argument. Louise looked amazing at weddings. In fact, white was probably the only color she didn't look hot in, and being a guest meant she could come in a backless yellow dress that made Stuart a little worried she might draw too much of the wrong kind of attention. The kind, he meant, that came from anyone other than him.

She was certainly drawing enough of the right kind of attention.

So, while he was certain he was right, he simply sighed and whispered "You're right. Doesn't mean I'm not ready for this thing to start."

Louise looked at her watch. "Three minutes, if they start on time."

Stuart nodded, trying to look as though he was impressed by the surroundings, rather than simply bored as he looked around.

The affair was taking place in a farmer's field - fully two hundred yards from the nearest bathroom, in the farmhouse of Steve's uncle - with an idyllic pond and the backdrop. The 'chapel' was an area roughly the size of a church where the grass had been cut manicured, with a small podium at the front and tables at the back establishing boundaries.

They were seated on the groom's side of the arrangement. Another idea that struck him as ridiculous. When people lived together for eight years, as Emma and Steve had done before getting married, everyone they knew was basically welcome on both sides of the aisle. Weddings, Stuart was certain, would be the last part of contemporary life to modernize.

They'd booked a horse drawn carriage to take them to the reception hall, for Christ's sake.

On the other side, the bride's side, something didn't look right. Correction, something didn't feel right. There was a teenage girl leading an elderly man - Emma's grandfather? - to his seat, but he wasn't moving the way he was supposed to.

Quick glance around: nobody else seemed to be paying any attention.

Stare hard at the old man: something about him didn't seem right. It took him a moment to figure out what it was, but it was impossible for Stuart to place the man's hair color, or even if he was wearing glasses or not. His total impression was of a boring old man, but he couldn't place any specifics.

In fact, when he tried to look more closely, he didn't look like much of an old man.

"Babe," Stuart said, "does anything seem strange about her grandfather?"

"I wish you wouldn't call me that."

His eyes still on the old man, Stuart felt Louise turn in the seat next to him, looking at him rather than the old man. "I mean, is he wearing glasses? The man in the aisle?"

He could feel Louise turn back again. "You're so. . ." Her voice trailed. "I can't. . ."

Suddenly, the old man's head snapped around to look at them. Not in their direction, at them. There was menace behind his eyes, except they weren't eyes. It was a. . .

"Do you see what I see?"

Louise didn't answer.

Reluctantly, Stuart looked away from the grandfather-who-wasn't to look at Louise. She'd gone white, eyes wide. "Babe?" He asked.

"Tell me," she said, not looking away from him, "that you can kill that."

Stuart looked back. Why was no one else panicking? The old man held up his cane and, looking more closely, it wasn't a cane. It was flat and white and translucent. It was a. . . He felt stupid for thinking the word. It felt like something only teenagers ever thought about.

"I mean, kill it now." Louise said.

Stuart made some decisions without trying. Once the situation crystallized in his mind - a sighting, here! - everything became clear. "Look away," he whispered to Louise. "Let him think he's scared us into ignoring him."

"I want it dead."

"I know. It will be, but it shouldn't see me."

Louise sighed and turned to look at him. "Did you know? Was that why you brought your?"

"I'd heard stories. Well, read them. It's why I bought it in the first place. Do me a favor?"

She looked at him. "Is it looking away? Can you. . .?"

"Yeah," he said, in a moment. "I got a job for you. It's going to get crazy here, real fast. It's happened other places, but nobody ever had proof. I need for you to get your phone out and video anything you can. Also, try to stay alive."

Bending down to get her purse, she asked "You think it's more than. . ."

"You never see an Elite all by his lonesome." Stuart said. He stretched dramatically, made a face, and moved his hands as though he were going to rub his back. Looking at the old man - sitting now, in the front row - he checked that he wouldn't be shooting anybody else, anybody behind the man, by accident. "Three. . . Two. . . One. . ."

. "

It was meant to be a fluid moment. It always is. But, getting the handgun out of his holster and clear of his coat was more difficult than expected. Nevertheless, he had it out and leveled before anybody had time to react. There was an initial gasp of surprise from people around him - no screams, yet - when he pulled the trigger the first time.

He should have expected that. It always seemed to take way more headshots than was realistic to kill an elite. The best he could tell, all he did was pitch it forward from its seat so that it fell onto the ground, exposed in molded-whatever body armor, climbing back to it's feet as he looked.

He pulled the trigger three more times, rapid barks splitting the screams that were around him. The elite sprawled out on the ground, convulsing with each impact and then pushed up on the ground again. Stuart pulled the trigger until the clip was empty, watching the convulsions just past the iron sights of his automatic.

The screaming was serious now. There was a real danger that some hero would try to disarm Stuart - though he only had one more clip, and it was in Louise's purse - without knowing why he'd fired. Realizing that he had stood up, Stuart looked down at Louise and saw that she wasn't even filming the elite he'd just dispatched she was filming something else on the bride's side of the aisle.

At four he lost count, because the grunts were moving back and forth, knocking over chairs and firing their needlers seemingly at random. Glancing back to see that the elite was properly dead, he saw Steve, standing at the altar and looking down at the dead body of the elite in a strange sort of shock. Some part of him simply said that, if he wasn't already in action, Steve was as good as dead and all Stuart could do was to keep Louse alive and get out of there.

"In your purse," he yelled to her, "there's another magazine. Get it out for me, I'll be right back."

Across from them were grunts, only grunts, senselessly killing whoever was closest. He had a moment, maybe two, before they ran out of targets that were nearer.

And grunts were always susceptible to melee attacks.

He grabbed his chair, lifted up the seat to fold it and then, taking a step around Louise and another towards the nearest grunt just to gather momentum, he let it have everything he had and felt the satisfying pop of Covenant skull giving way beneath his strength. Another step and a back and forth motion and the other two grunts were dead.

Dropping to one knee, he picked up their needlers, too shy to frisk their strange, alien bodies for extra ammunition - the things that were always so automatic in the video games - and turned back to Louise.

Dammit.

She was filming him and the grunts - bet he'd never look so badass

again in his life - but behind her there was a jackal. It was distracted by something at the front of the outdoor chapel area, but still too close for comfort.

It was no wonder that needlers had projectiles that sought after their targets. The bitches were almost impossible to aim. Trying to make sure that they didn't lock onto Louise, he fired his first shots too high. Then, sidestepping to get her out of the line of fire, he emptied both the remaining needlers into it. It tumbled forward, dead, without ever having seen him.

Looking at Louise - she was holding his extra clip between the pinky and ring finger of the hand holding her iPhone - and then at the front of the chapel, he saw Steve was improbably still alive. And holding his own against a few charging grunts backed up by jackals. Apparently, the metal chair he was using stopped their ammunition.

File that under 'good to know.'

Taking the clip from Louise, he got his handgun back out - he had no memory of ever putting it back in its holster, but there it was - and dropped the empty clip on the floor. When he smacked the new one into place, he heard the grunts begin speaking in their freakish, alien language. He had an idea what they were talking about.

"Don't leave. . ."

"Be right back." He promised her, not looking back.

Not five or six feet from where the elite was sprawled on the ground, the particle sword he'd been carrying was laying, no longer disguised as a cane. It should have been a question of only a few steps to get the sword, but all around them was chaos. Guests, the human ones, were panicking, screaming, dying. Between them were grunts and jackals and, there, in the corner, an elite still wearing the strapless black dress that Emma's mother had worn to the wedding.

Was all of Emma's family Covenant? Was she?

There wasn't much time to look. Nothing seemed to be coming for him, so he made his move, stepping and stumbling over the chair in front of him, pushing the chairs in front of that one out of the way with his hip, he felt someone smaller than him go down as he connected with his shoulder. Someone grabbed his leg and, without turning, he flailed back and smacked them with the pistol. They let go.

Now he was stepping over the corpses of grunts dispatched by Steve. Spontaneously deciding to conserve his last clip, he scooped up a needler and, with a barked, "Steve! Dude! I'm going for that Jackal on the right, don't get in front of me!" took aim as best he could at the little opening in the jackal's shield.

The first three shots sailed past, curving towards their target but not enough. The fourth connected and the jackal pulled back, exposing himself. Before Stuart could take another shot, though, he heard Steve call "Got the fucker!" and saw a folding chair curve through the air and, missing the jackal, knock the shield from its hands.

Steve was right behind it, swinging another chair in chopping motions that all ended with a wet thud.

"Tango down!" Steve yelled back to Stuart.

"Wrong game!" Stuart called, smiling, "but I completely get what you're saying." Had he ever had so much fun? Had he ever been so afraid?

"Let's get caught up on details later." Steve answered, advancing on the next jackal.

The jackal looked over at Steve and, seeing his blood smeared folding chair, turned to put its shield between it and Steve.

Meaning it left itself open to needler fire from Stuart.

Of course, Stuart still wasn't ready to run his hands over the sticky, bloodied bodies of the grunts to get at their extra ammunition, so there was no telling how much ammo was left in the needler he had. Still, he could see at least one more about a step away. And being close to the Covenant had the unintended benefit of keeping civilians out of his way.

So he fired. And, of course, there was one shot left in the needler in his hand. All he did, was draw the jackal's attention. He dropped the first needler and dropped to a knee to grab the next. When he brought it back up, he saw that Steve had taken advantage of the jackal's distraction and was adding more Covenant blood to his chair.

There was one more jackal, and it was firing at Steve. Stuart, still on one knee, fired several shots. Then, on an instinct, slowed his rate of fire up. The jackal would get hit by a needle, recoil and twitch, begin to line his shield up with Stuart, and get hit again.

When the shield was knocked out of its hands and the chair connected with its head, it seemed to die with an expression of surprise on its alien features.

"You good?" Stuart called.

"Yeah. You?" Steve was bending down to pick up a needle rifle.

"Yeah. Gotta get back to Louise."

"See you at the bar after?"

"I gotta. . ."

"It's an open bar, man."

Stuart stepped over the elite now and dropped to his knee again for the particle sword. It hummed in his hand. "I'll be there."

"Looking forward to it." Steve grinned, until a crashing sound somewhere behind Stuart drew his attention, and he took off, dropping

his bloodied chair and sprinting in his rented tux with a last, "See you there."

Stuart moved back towards Louise. She was staring raptly at her iPhone screen, holding the phone up as though it was some sort of shield between her and the action.

"Babe," Stuart said, dropping to one knee again next to her. "I want you to take this. It'll cut anything that comes at you in half. Just be careful you don't hurt yourself."

"You left me." She sounded more shocked than angry.

"Listen to me." He said and then, grabbing her face between his palms, he turned her face until she was looking at him. "Listen, we don't want the aliens coming to us, not here where you are. That means I have to go to them. I'm not leaving you, I'm killing the fuckers who want to hurt us."

"I. . ." Louise looked at him. Her moment of wide-eyed panic seemed to have receded and a bit of color came back into her face as she looked at him critically, weighing what he said. "You were really good up there with Steve."

Stuart grinned. "Yeah. I was."

"Go kill them. Kill them all."

Stuart was still holding her face, so he only had to move his hands around to the back of her head to pull her in for a kiss. Not long, but hard. "Did I tell you you look hot in that dress?"

"Go." She said. "I'll still be hot when you come back."

An unmistakable sound told them both that they'd been distracted too long. There were three grunts coming down the aisle towards them, the last with the unmistakable blue glow of plasma grenades on each of his hands as he toddled towards them.

"Fuck." Stuart had put his handgun on the ground next to him, and, without taking his eyes off the approaching grunts, he began feeling for it. He wasn't going to be fast enough.

Suddenly, there was a popping noise and a short burst of 'yay!' He watched as the last grunt, the one with the grenades, bust in a shower of confetti. He snorted a laugh, and leveled his handgun at the grunt nearest to him. Before he could pull the trigger, it and the grunt behind it both exploded in similar confetti showers.

He wasn't sure where the instinct came from: from the game, from movies, or whatever. But, it was without thinking that he threw himself on top of Louise until the the double-explosions of the grenades going off had passed. He was up before some of the dead were finished falling.

"What the fuck?" Louise had picked her iPhone back up, was holding it between her and the action like a shield of some kind.

"I could explain," he said, "but there's no time."

"Confetti? Like, for the wedding?"

"Sometimes," Stuart said, scanning the chapel area to see who'd helped him with the grunts, "you don't get to set the skulls. You just got to play the map you're given."

As he said that, he locked his eyes on Steven, now over by a table with a shot up wedding cake on it. Next to him was a woman Stuart didn't know with close cropped blonde hair, also handling a needle rifle as though she was familiar with weapons. "Dude! We need your help! There are elites in the trees over there."

"Remember what I said about that sword," Stuart said, getting back to his feet, "it's crazy sharp."

He sprinted towards Steven and the unknown person. Diving through the last row of chairs, scattering them with his shoulders, taking cover behind the table as some sort of green shot flew through the air over his head.

"That wasn't an elite." He said, coming up to peer over the smashed cake into the trees. "That was a. . ."

"A hunter?" That was the voice of the woman on his left. "Yeah. We're pretty well fucked."

"I dunno, this is turning out to be more interesting than I thought it was going to be."

She laughed, but it was Steven who spoke. "Stuart, you know Rachel? She went to high school with me, joined the Marines."

"Two tours in Iraq, didn't see as much action as at Stevie's wedding."

There were definitely hunters in the trees over there. And some elites. Stuart dropped down behind the table. "Stevie? I've had your name wrong all these years?"

"Make fun of me later. We gotta take those hunters out."

"We're not going to do that, until we get the elites." Rachel pointed out. "How well you know this place?"

"Well enough."

"We gotta draw the elites away. Take them out. Hopefully, they're carrying something we can use on those hunters." She paused a minute, pushed her head up just enough to get a glimpse over the table and then shook her head as though she couldn't believe it herself. "Hunters. Fuck!"

"What do you need from me?" Steve asked.

"These people - the ones that are still alive - they're going to stay here. We need to get the hunters shooting in another direction, and have a little room to separate the elites from the hunters. They're faster."

Steven gestured towards a pond to the right of the copse of trees



where the elites and hunters were taking pot shots at them. We'll be more exposed . . ."

"And don't I love the sound of that." Rachel had the ability to laugh really bitterly.

". . . but they won't be shooting towards civilians."

Rachel looked skeptical, she looked at Stuart as though he had some sort of veto power.

"I don't have a better plan, if that's what you're asking."

At about thirty yard intervals, they sprinted towards the pond, agreeing to find concealment behind different clumps of cattails. Rachel, Stuart had to admit, really knew how to run. She was responsible for luring the first elite - or, as it turned out, the first elites - away. She actually sprinted up to about twenty yards from the nearest hunter, beat an elite in the head with her needle rifle as hard as she could, and then sprinted back, past the pond.

The idea was that the elite would follow her, and Stuart and Steven would both combine their needler fire to take it out. The reality was a little different, because all three of the elites they could see in the trees came after her and their combined needler fire was just enough to take out one of the elites.

"Dammitall!" Steven said. "I'm out."

Stuart, without thinking, got up and, running past Steven's position, quickly swapped rifles. "Aimed fire," he said, still out of breathe from the dash over from the wedding area and seriously questioning his stamina, "not fast, and not often. Just enough to keep him from focusing on me."

"What the. . .?" Steven began to say, but Stuart was off, carrying Steven's empty rifle. He bounded over the elite they'd taken out, seeing that there was a weapon on the ground, but in too much of a hurry to identify it. He hoped that Steven would figure out what he meant when he saw it.

Holding the barrel of the empty needle rifle like a baseball bat, he smashed the elite about the head twice and felt painful shocks all the way up into his back. "Come on, Steven!" He whispered, dancing about the elite who was trying to aim something - was that a fuel rod cannon? he did not want to give the alien a chance to aim that at him - at him. He swung the rifle at the canon, hoping to break it free of the elite's grip, but no luck.

Finally, a needle shot hit the elite in the head and he was pushed almost off balance to the side and had to flail his arms out to maintain balance. Stuart swung again, hard. Seeing the elite drop to his knees, he swung again and connected. It began to get up, but just then two needler shots hit it in the torso - Steven figured out what he was supposed to do - and Stuart got in another solid hit.

Stuart's next blow was thrown off by an assault cannon shot landing nearby. He fell down, but so did the elite. Unfortunately, the elite

was faster getting to his feet. Stuart suddenly remembered that elites were supposedly as good as the Master Chief. Flailing with the needle rifle, trying to keep the fuel rod cannon from pointing at him, Stuart had to wonder what made him think he could take on an elite? He wasn't near as good as the Master Chief.

Then another needler shot - this time, from another direction, Rachel, maybe? - took the elite in the face and he stumbled. Stuart kicked out in panic at the elite's legs and he tumbled over. Planting the butt of the needle rifle on the ground, Stuart pushed himself up. And raised it over his head. And he brought the butt down, he felt the satisfying crunch of something giving at the other end of the rifle. He brought it up again, and watching needle shots hit the elite from two different directions, he brought it down on the fucker's head with so much force that he really thought he'd pull his feet up off the ground.

The elite crumbled, sprawling his arms to his side and landing on his face. Glancing at the last elite standing - not far away, but taking hits from Rachel's needle rifle as Steve ran up, obviously also out of ammo now - Stuart gave the elite at his feet a solid kick.

And realized that his dressed shoes were not meant for ass kicking.

"Fuck." He said, more to himself than anyone else.

Dropping to one knee, he picked up the fuel rod cannon from the ground and lined it up on the elite. He pulled the trigger and watched the elite drop over to his side.

And then put his hands down and start pushing himself up. As he was just getting to his feet, Stuart tried to line the elite's unsteady head up in his sights when he saw something blue and glowing race past him and stick to the faceplate of the elite's helmet. What was that?

"Stuart, get the fuck down!" Steve was much too loud, considering he was only a few paces away.

Right. A plasma grenade.

Stuart didn't throw himself down so much as he pulled his feet up and let himself collapse to the ground. He didn't even have time to feel the pain of the impact when the grenade exploded, pushing a shock wave across his body that felt like someone was sprinted along his back.

"Dammit, eh." He said, pushing his upper body up enough to see that the elite was dead.

"Just like in college, yeah?" Steven said, getting up next to him. "We were always best together."

"We were, yeah." Stuart said. "I don't know if I can get those hunters. I'm fucking beat."

Wearily, he looked over at them and saw that they had their backs to them, firing up the hill at the road where there were police cars parked in uncountable numbers. Several of them were already burning,

and the police were firing at them.

"Do none of them know you gotta get behind them?" Stuart hadn't heard Rachel approach them.

"They'll figure it out." Steven said.

"But I don't think I want to be there when they do." Rachel added.

Stuart looked at her.

"What? You think they're going to let us keep these?" She held up the fuel rod cannon she'd also picked up. "Really?"

"If we're bailing," Stuart said, "I gotta bring my wife."

"Thank god I don't have a wife." Steven said. "Do you think she was?"

Rachel nodded. "I killed her. With some dick's iPad. Who uses an iPad to take photos at a wedding?"

They were walking now back to the chapel. Steven, understandably, was less concerned with the etiquette of iPad photography than with the question of Emma's species. "Do you think she always was? I mean, when we were. . . ?"

"No." Stuart's voice was firmer than he'd meant it to be. "I mean, their disguises weren't that good. That's how Louise and I, just by looking at him hard." Stuart nodded towards Louise, who was at the head of a small group of survivors - six or maybe eight people - who were limping from the chapel area towards them.

"Hmm." Steve nodded. "Still, it means I don't have a wife to take with me."

"No." Stuart said.

"Hmm." Steve nodded again, seemingly making up his mind about something. "I'm taking the fucking bar."

## 2. The University

Joel didn't know that he was only minutes away from a breakdown. What he did know was that there was a reason he preferred this game in co-op. He was better at making decisions when he could talk through them.

Right now, for example, there were two grunts around the corner in this hallway. Should he go attack them unarmed? He knew of at least one grunt behind him, if it ever learned to turn a doorknob. Should he charge or hide? What Joel needed more than anything was a weapon. Second on that list, though, was someone from his clan to help him talk through this.

He always stank at doing this alone.

But, one way or another, that was the only way he was going to do

this.

After taking a deep breath, Joel ran around the corner and saw the two grunts literally jump as he came hurtling at them. Putting his shoulder into the one closest to him, he punched the next one in the head with all the force he could muster. His hand hurt, but mostly he was startled that its skin felt like fake leather.

It went down, but it was still moving. Reflexively, he kicked it, hard. And again.

Then, he kicked the other grunt, which was crawling over the floor, probably towards its weapon. He kicked it again. And then again. Finally, he walked over to it's head and kicked it with all the force he had.

Then he did the same for the other grunt, even though it hadn't moved.

Collecting both plasma pistols, he quickly moved his hands over the outside of the grunts' uniforms, looking for extra ammo. He didn't find any, but he did find grenades. Deciding he'd rather risk them setting each other off than leave them behind, he dropped them in his backpack and zipped it back up.

The backpack on both shoulders, one plasma pistol in each hand, he started back in the same direction he'd been going. He had no plan. He didn't even know if anybody he knew was alive.

But he could punch grunts out. How badass was that?

Sticking one of the plasma pistols in his belt, he pulled his phone out to thumb through menus as he moved down the hallway. Facebook was alive. A lot of people were alive. He took a photo of himself, holding a plasma pistol in front of his face. When he looked at it, he realized that his head was in front of the dead grunts behind him. He took another photo.

"Shit is real." Was all he bothered to send, and then he pressed send.

After he put his phone away, he got it back out and set it to silent. Then, putting it away again, he listened as hard as he could.

He began to laugh.

What would campus police do if they found him with three plasma pistols and a backpack full of grenades? Did he risk censure for 'cultural insensitivity' because he killed three grunts?

The laughing turned to suppressed giggling, but it was hard to stop.

When someone commented on his selfie with the plasma pistol that he 'looked like a kid in the candy store,' it struck him as the funniest thing ever. He literally had to lean against the wall he was laughing so hard.

There was a chat room he used with his clan to coordinate games. That seemed a better bet than Facebook, which was mostly just hysteria

mixed with religion and politics. Was this really the time to bring up the second amendment? The chat room, normally used to keep in touch and organize game times, was quickly morphing into some sort of information-swapping center on the various properties of the Covenants. It seemed the game, improbably, was remarkably accurate, right down to the grunt birthday party skull, which was creepy. Also, it was agreed that, if you stayed alert, the grunts didn't pose much of a problem. In small numbers, the jackals were also nothing to worry about, if you were able to arm yourself. The elites, however, were a bitch to kill.

There were a lot of people being reported dead at the hands of the elites, which was a sobering idea. And hunters. There were hunters. Joel had really only seen the few grunts in his building, but there were a lot of reports of hunters in groups of two or three, taking out entire police forces.

Joel had to start thinking further ahead. Move? Seek contact with the enemy on his own terms? Hole up and hope the situation is dealt with before he starved?

He chose what felt like a middle option: get a feel for the lay of the land. Drawing up his memory of this building from the outside, he realized that there weren't any windows in it. Terrible observation post.

Across the quad was the James Warns Administration Building, which was like a giant phallus of glass rising above the campus. Plus, there were one or two administrators who could stand a healthy dose of friendly fire. He was going to move there.

Finding the front door of the fine arts building wasn't easy. And, by the time he did, he'd taken out six more grunts in groups of three, two and one. His backpack was now heavy with grenades, and he had plasma pistols in each hand and sticking out of his belt at odd angles like a pirate.

Strangely - did nobody else play Halo? - it seemed as though he were the only person alive in the building. He came across the bodies of four more faculty, but no students. Later, when he thought about this, it was clear: students carried phones, checked them. They were warned.

The quad wasn't filled with Covenant, but it was liberally sprinkled with them, doing that milling-about thing that they did when they weren't fighting, but also weren't really going anywhere. Joel shook his head. What he wouldn't give for a sniper rifle.

Mostly it was grunts, but he saw the shields of several - a half dozen, maybe - Jackals and one, two - four Elites. One of them in that gold armor that probably meant something more than the fact that it was going to be a pain in the balls to kill him, but that was all Joel could remember about it.

Suddenly, Joel was reminded - don't ask why, there was no surface similarity - to a moment in the original Halo, just after the Masterchief took some weird antigrav elevator up to a Covenant mothership with some Marines who were destined to be short-lived. He'd played through the carnage of that level maybe a hundred times before moving on, because that was when active camouflage was

introduced to the game.

These fuckers didn't have active camouflage, did they?

Never even opening the glass doors at the front of the building, Joel decided to head back to the emergency exit he'd come in and to skirt around the whole thing. He wasn't ready to run head-first into the quad just yet.

Joel was sneaking up on a pair of Jackals who were just walking aimlessly on the street behind the fine arts building when he met Ella, who was doing the same on the other side of the street. At first, of course, when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye, he almost shot her with a plasma pistol - all this time and he still hadn't used it - but, with her dark eyes and curly hair it was clear she wasn't Covenant.

She was moving along the side of a building on the opposite side of the street, going from bush to bush when the Jackals' backs were turned. He was doing about the same in the bit of yard between the fine arts building and the street. The obvious thing to do was to coordinate their attack, but it turned out that there really was no universal sign language. Or, if there were, neither of them could use it.

The Jackals would walk closer, facing them, and the two of them would hide behind their respective bushes. Then, the Jackals would walk away and they'd make weird gestures in the air. Joel really thought that his 'walking man' illustration with his fingers was pretty clear, but she just shrugged.

This happened three or four times before Ella took the initiative. When the Jackals turned their backs again, she sprinted across the road and flopped down next to him behind the bush. Joel saw her coming and turned his attention to the Jackals, in case they heard her and turned around. They didn't even flinch.

"Never really thought about how stupid those guys are." She said. "I mean, if they, you know, would turn on seven or eight brain cells, they'd be fine. Lucky for us they don't."

"You armed?" Joel asked.

"Was going to take something from these guys."

Joel handed her a plasma pistol. "They're pretty easy to get from grunts."

"Hmm." She said and then, when it was clear that the conversation was stalled, "plan?"

"You take one and I take one?"

"I'd kill for a grenade right now."

Joel looked at her. "Why didn't I think of that. I've got a bag of them." He was already opening his backpack. "You any good at throwing them?"

"I don't know. I'm pretty good with a softball."

They both looked the grenade over and tried to figure out how to arm it. There was no visible pin to pull but, when they did figure it out, Ella looked at him. "These are the sticky ones, right?"

"I think so. The frags are human grenades. Got these from Covenant."

"Okay."

The two Jackals were still walking the same stretch of road back and forth, stupidly. As they approached, Ella got up on her fingertips and toes, like she was at a starting line. When the Jackals turned around, she sprung upright, armed the grenade and threw it overarm. It flew straight as a baseball pitch.

The Jackal it hit stumbled forward two steps and then spun around in alarm. The other Jackal was already firing in their direction. Ella flattened herself to the ground again and said, "after the boom, we go."

"Got it."

The explosion wasn't as loud as Joel expected, but it was more visceral. Loud though it was, it was something felt more than it was heard. As soon as he heard it, Joel pushed himself up and began running. And, even so, found he was behind Ella.

A foul-smelling, wet patch of asphalt was all that remained of the Jackal that the grenade stuck to. The other was prone on the ground and it wasn't clear whether it was dead or not. Running to it, Ella performed a maneuver Joel had never seen before. She jumped and, as she landed with both feet on the Jackal's head, she stomped with such force that it looked as though she bounced off. The wet sound that the head made under her impact and the uncomfortable sight of wrong-colored blood spilling from its mouth made it clear that, whether the grenade killed it or not, this Jackal was no longer a danger.

There was a needler and a carbine, as well as four more grenades.

"Should have brought a bag." Ella said.

"The dead have bags." Joel said. "I'll carry the grenades until you can get one. Take whatever weapon you want. I'm equally bad with all of them."

"I thought all boys were Halo experts." Ella picked up the needler and held it in her right hand, the plasma pistol in her left.

"Eh." Joel shrugged, "I always played more to talk smack."

"You play Halo like a \_girl\_." Ella said in a tone of mock teasing. "We shouldn't stay here."

"I was going to James Warns," Joel said, meaning the administration building. "Got a better plan?"

"Nope."

They continued moving around the outside of the buildings surrounding the quad. As thick as the Covenant were in the middle of the quad, they were strangely thin here. So much so that Ella asked Joel to let her 'practice' on some Grunts they came across. And, again.

Whenever they came across groups stronger than two grunts, Ella used her overarm grenade throw and then they rushed. It worked well, and Joel wondered if the Covenant was capable of learning. Did they have satellites in the sky now, watching? Were they seeing the strategies that worked and thinking of ways to counter them?

When they made it to the James Warns administration building, none of the doors not facing the quad were unlocked. "Should we knock?" Ella asked. "Walk around the front?"

"Think a grenade will do the trick?" Joel asked. "When I looked, there were a lot of Covenant on the quad."

"Right." Ella said. "There are not a lot of us. It's worth a try."

The grenade was a mixed blessing. It blew a hole in the door, but so warped the door that it was stuck tightly in its frame. It took the two of them pulling together on the sharpened, bloodthirsty edges of the twisted metal to get it open.

Inside, there were a lot of bodies. Almost entirely human.

"Think there are still Covies here?" Ella asked.

Joel shrugged. "Won't hurt to assume there are."

There were. In fact, Joel got his first wound when needler fire exploded the glass of a door he was hiding behind and it left him with cuts on his face and right arm. But, the two of them successfully cleared the aliens, and Joel made use of the trick of holding down the trigger on the plasma pistol. It took a Jackal out in one shot, but the recoil traveled painfully up his arms, through his elbows and to his shoulders such that, when they reached the top floor, he was still shaking his arms out, trying to chase the pain away.

On the top floor there were, of course, quite a few Covies. They had some kind of communication equipment. Apparently, the Covenant had the same idea that Joel and Ella had had: control the top floor.

Joel and Ella backed slowly into the stairway they'd just come out of.

"How is your grenade arm?" Joel asked.

"Bigger question is, how much is this like the game?"

"What do you mean?"

"In the game we could never destroy their equipment." Ella's idea was pretty straightforward: if the first grenades took the communication equipment out, the Covies couldn't call for reinforcements.



"I'll throw for the radios." Joel said. "You're doing better with the actually hitting moving targets bit. Hit everything big."

Ella nodded. "We pop out, throw three grenades each, pop back in."

Joel nodded.

They opened Joel's backpack and each took three grenades. Then, Ella gave Joel a nod which he understood to mean 'you first,' and he activated a grenade and slammed up against the door's crashbar.

The radio equipment was, of course, still where it was when they'd looked the first time. He threw. Then, he activated another grenade and threw it. There was an elite firing wildly, apparently unable to see because of the glowing plasma grenade on its faceplate. Good job to Ella. There wasn't time to think and he'd activated his third grenade before picking a target. He looked for the biggest clump of Covies he could find, and tossed before running back to the stairs.

Or, he wanted to run back to the stairs. Instead, he ran squarely into Ella, who was still looking for a target for her third grenade, and they both tumbled into the stairs.

Joel slammed the door behind him and pressed his back against the coarse cinder block wall. Ella looked down at her hand as though she couldn't believe she had a grenade in it and, as the grenades they'd thrown began to explode with a noise that was at once sharp and thumping, she began to panic.

Loudly.

"Woo!" She said in a high-pitched tone, and made many syllables that might have been an artistic interpretation of 'uh-oh' and she began to turn and run in place. At least three of the grenades they'd thrown had already exploded and she was standing there holding an activated grenade.

"Down the stairs!" Joel shouted. "Throw it!"

Instinctively wanting as much of the solid building between her and the grenade, Ella leaned over the railing and threw it under their own landing, before collapsing against the wall. More grenades thumped on the other side of the door and then, after a brief pause, the grenade below them exploded, sending vibrations up through their shoes and hammering their ears with compressed air. Both of them sank to sit on the floor and Joel needed a moment to process the fact that he couldn't hear anything before training his rifle on the door.

His vision wasn't fading to white, but the whistling that alternated with alien, unnatural silence did remind him a lot of his Modern Warfare games. Hopefully, they weren't going to start coming true, too.

The way he could tell his hearing was returning was because he could hear Ella's laughing. He looked at her and, chastened, she made a visible effort to stop, but soon exploded with the pent up energy of it all.

"That was close." She said.

Joel had to laugh. "Yeah."

"If I die today," Ella said, using the backs of her thumbs to wipe tears from her eyes, "I want them to kill me. I don't want to die of stupid."

Joel snorted a laugh. "Sorry about pushing you in here."

Ella laughed. "Yeah. Whatever. . ."

They were quiet for a moment. Ella gestured at the door. "What do you think?"

"I don't hear anything."

Ella laughed. "Right now, I don't think it means anything. I mean, that was pretty creepy."

"Yeah."

"Plan:" Ella said in such a way that Joel could hear the colon after the word. "Same thing, but no grenades, plasma pistol fire. Dash out, shoot shoot shoot, you give the word and we dash back."

Joel smiled. "Shoot shoot shoot."

"Ideally, we'll hit whatever is out there."

"Sounds good." Even though they'd been talking full voice, something about the impending action made Joel want to be a little sneakier. He held up his left hand - he'd taken a plasma pistol in his right - with the fingers spread. Then, folding his fingers in, he started a slow count-down. When only his thumb was still up, he pulled the door open.

"Shoot shoot shoot!" He called, both as a joke and a kind of battle cry.

His first two shots were unaimed, just in the direction of the action. Then, he saw some grunts milling about the busted radio table. Communicating? Trying to fix the radio? He began firing into the group. None of them had gone down when he saw the distinctive blue glow of a plasma grenade arch into the group.

"Back!" Ella screamed.

In the stairs again, Joel realized his hands were shaking. "Think there's a coffee machine up here?" He asked.

"I know you were supposed to give the. . ." Ella stopped mid-sentence and looked at him. "I would kill for a coffee. In fact, I would kill just to kill. But, yeah. Coffee."

"That's what I'm saying."

"Just the grunts there?" Ella asked.

"I didn't see anything else. What do you say we take them out and go scavenging."

"Woo hoo! Scavenging!" Ella grinned. "Makes us sound like jackals."

"Would you like me to call you the jackal?" Joel said. "To be honest, I've forgotten your real name."

"Ella," she provided automatically. "But my friends call me the jackal." She grinned.

"We gonna kill these guys?"

"How many are left?"

Joel opened the door and leaned out a little. He pulled it back in when the needler fire started. "Two? I didn't see any more than that."

Ella was silent a moment, and then nodded.

"We move up, shooting, and then just beat the crap out of them if they're still alive."

"I gotta tell you, my ass-kicking muscles are getting worn out." Ella sounded tired.

"Think of the coffee." Joel said. "And tomorrow you get to say that you've got a cramp in your ass-kicker."

Ella smiled and pushed herself upright from the wall she'd been leaning against. "That's reason enough to do almost anything."

In the end, it went fairly quickly. Concentrated plasma fire and Joel beating the grunts with office implements. The second one had been so weakened by Ella's plasma fire, that it died when Joel kicked it as hard as he could in the chest. Just crumpled together and fell to the floor.

"Check them for weapons." Joel said. "I'll get on the coffee."

It was an administrative building and the top floor had obviously been for some pretty high muckity-mucks. They were in a very nice reception area, with the remains of potted palms in front of the windows and a high countertop where a receptionist had clearly sat with the university logo on the wall behind her. She was lifeless on the floor behind the countertop.

Joel listened a moment very carefully but didn't hear anything. He moved down the hallway, looking in the glass doors at the offices, many with people dead at the door or even slumped over their desks.

In the middle of the hallway was a small room labeled 'coffee kitchen.' He quickly found what he wanted and started heading back.

It was with his hands full that he heard Ella scream something and then say "You cowardly bastard!" Running to the room, he got there

just in time to see an elite raise a particle sword over its head. Ella literally threw herself over a table to get out of the way of the particle sword.

Joel dropped the coffee and pulled his plasma pistol from his belt, but before he could line it up the elite exploded, hitting Joel with a fist of compressed air that was only a little smaller than what he'd felt in the stairs. He was dazed for a moment, but, when he saw Ella come up from behind the desk, he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Think we should be doing something?" Joel asked. They were sitting now, drinking coffee and looking out the broken windows at the quad. There were an unusual number of Covenant there and Joel idly wondered why they'd pick the university. Were they attacking everywhere? Was the university well situated? Did they have resources that the Covenant wanted? Were they taking out the highest concentration of Halo players first and then planning to roll up everyone else?

"I told you," Ella said after a pause so long that Joel had to think a moment what his question was, "my ass-kicker is getting worn out. Lemme get another cup or two of this and then we'll talk."

"No way we can attack them." They were milling about, so it was impossible to count them accurately, but Joel figured there were at least fifty Covenant - and at least half a dozen elites - on the quad, and none of them showed any signs of leaving.

"Not without a respawn, no."

"Seriously."

There was another long pause - several sips of coffee - before Ella spoke again. "Think the Army is doing anything?"

Joel got his phone out. "I'm in the National Guard and. . . hey, yeah, they called me like seven times but my phone was on silent. So, I guess they're getting ready."

"You gotta go?"

"It's an hour drive. And there are Covenant everywhere. My phone was busted."

Ella nodded. "A couple of those purple scooter things on the highway would clean traffic right up."

"Ghosts." Joel said, unable to stop himself from making the correction. "Think they really have unlimited ammo like in the game?"

"Hmm." Was all Ella answered. Her ass-kicker really was worn out.

A moment later, they both jumped up as the door to the stairwell was slammed open. Ella was up with a grenade in her hand and Joel had his rifle trained on the door. After a moment, a human voice called out from the stairs "Hello?"

"Hello?" Joel answered. "Let's not go shooting here."

Six people - four men and two women - came out of the stairs. "Glad to see you." The first said, he was tall and had shaggy black hair that he wore long in wavy locks. He took note of the Covenant bodies laying around. "Been busy."

"Yeah." Ella said, "It was fun, but not my ass-kicker's tired."

There was scattered laughter. "I hear that," the man who'd apparently appointed himself the speaker said. He had an honest-to-god beam rifle in his hands. "My name is Scott, and these are Mary, Professor Hidgens, Karl, Ward, and Stewart."

They all waved when he said their names. Mary looked to be in shock or, perhaps, Joel thought her ass-kicker was just tired. Professor Hidgens was a brunette who looked too old to be a student, but far too young to be called professor. Karl, Ward and Stewart all obviously knew each other before the Covenant showed up. They were a sort of unit, standing together in clothes that should have been in the laundry and looking a little shocked for all their bristling with Covenant weaponry.

"Been here long?" Professor Hidgens asked.

Joel and Ella looked at each other. They didn't have an appointed speaker. "About a cup of coffee." Ella said. "Ten minutes?"

"Time feels weird now, doesn't it?" Karl asked. He didn't seem to like not being the one who spoke.

"Yeah." Joel said.

"Anyway," Scott looked at his watch. "The plan is like this: at half past - ten minutes - we're supposed to provide supporting fire for the attack on the Commons."

"The commons?" Ella asked.

"The quad." One of the three who stuck together - their names were already forgotten - answered. "There was a big discussion. For the purpose of coordination, it's to be called the commons."

Joel had an involuntary and entirely negative reaction to the phrase 'for the purpose of coordination.' Glancing at Ella, he saw her glancing at him and realized she'd had the same reaction.

"Okay?"

"Me and Ward are going to do some sniping. These guys" - Scott's gesture clearly meant everyone else - "are going to try and keep any bad guys from coming up the stairs."

"For the purpose of coordination," Ella said, "could we refer to them as Covenant. I'm attracted to bad guys, but haven't yet felt any chemistry with the Covenant."

Joel looked at her dumbfounded. Ella's face was completely serious, but there was the same spark in her eyes as had been there when she talked about being called the jackal.

Scott didn't seem to realize he was being mocked. He just slumped a

little as though the thought of a discussion along those lines wore him out. "Right," he said a little curtly, "the Covenant."

"I think we could help with the stairs detail." Joel said. "Not that I can speak for the jackal here."

Ella grinned when she heard it. "Glad to help."

Joel wound up starting coffee while they all waited for the remaining eight minutes to pass so that this attack on the quad could take place. Scott settled in to set up as a sniper breaking the remaining glass out of the bottom of the windows and cleaning the floors. Eventually, Ward felt compelled to go and act all sniper-like as well and headed over.

The others made awkward small talk at the top of the stairs.

"Think we should get set up somehow?" One of the women, the younger one asked.

"Don't know how." Someone else said.

"To be honest," Joel volunteered, "if there's going to be an attack, I kinda want to watch."

"You don't think they'll be shooting at the windows?" The professor asked.

"Hmm." Ella said. "We could go down a few floors."

And so, coffee cups in hand, they were all standing at a window with coffee cups in their hands when the attack started. In retrospect, the best word for the attack was tentative. It was as though all the people in all the buildings knew they were supposed to attack, but were all waiting to join an attack in progress.

Grenades were thrown from isolated windows. When the Covenant reacted with plasma cannon fire, there were more shots from other windows, more grenades. Someone in the room, Joel couldn't tell, mumbled under his breath "I don't need a plasma cannon when I'm rockin' these guns."

None of them opened the window and it was impossible to tell if there were shots coming from the snipers they were ostensibly defending. Joel walked to the stairs to give a listen.

"Son of \_fuck\_" Someone said.

"It's not fair." Someone else added.

"What level is this set on?" Ella asked.

Joel walked back. A Covenant drop ship was at the end of its characteristic looping approach. The turret under its chin was firing and Joel's stomach sank as it hovered in the air and the side doors opened.

And the drop ship exploded in the air and sank to the ground heavily. The impact shook the building, several of the windows broke in their frames, but nobody seemed to care.

"That's what I'm talking about!"

"Who the fuck was. . . ?"

A moment later, some kind of huge airplane - obviously an American fighter, but nobody had time to see what - thundered overhead. There was scattered applause. "I wondered why we didn't have any help." Ella said, looking out the window.

"Looks like we're winning." Someone said.

Down in the quad, they could see more human than Covenant. There was no clear front, it was more a mixed melee with both sides evenly distributed throughout the quad.

"Wish I had more coffee." Joel said.

"Better than TV." One of their new friends said.

A moment later, the fighter jet roared overhead at a ninety degree angle to its first approach. This time, before they could cheer, there was a stunned silence as explosions peppered the quad.

"Fuck. . ." Someone said in the stunned silence.

"There were. . ."

The yellow-orange of the explosions lasted only for a moment and was quickly replaced by billowing, white smoke which seemed to grow darker as it dissipated. When it cleared, the quad was stilled. They just. . ."

"That doesn't happen on TV." Ella said.

End  
file.